
Transformational pedagogy through curriculum development discourse

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the opportunity curriculum development discourse offers to create transformational pedagogy and curricula. As educators and curriculum developers, we have a responsibility to ensure we create a shared legacy in a renewed curriculum because we are privileged and entrusted with the learners’ journey in higher education. The literature urges engagement in curricula discourse and reflection promising transformed curricula as a result. Additionally discourse, in particular dissensus, can challenge and question current curricula development practice in order to contribute to development of richer and more informed curricula. This paper presents findings presented in one aspect of a framework designed for curriculum development practice and discourse, which I argue, if used as an early intervention tool can offer transformative potential for curricula.

Keywords: curriculum development; curriculum discourse; pedagogy; discourse analysis; transformational.

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1 Introduction

Curricula in higher education is under increasing pressure to contribute to economic and societal enhancement. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 view higher education as not only central to economic and social advancement but also as having a fundamental role in developing learners that have a broad sense of world agency and responsibility (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). These challenges and obligations are delivered through appropriately designed curricula. Educators are the primary source of curricula development and thus most centrally placed to help deliver on these significant requirements for higher education. Given their central role, the aim of this research was to elucidate the voice of educators with regard to their experience of curriculum development practice and discourse, in the context of higher education. The key objectives in realising this aim were to engage educators in curriculum development discourse; illuminate educators' philosophical beliefs and their influence on curriculum development; build capacity among educators in relation to their role in curriculum development; and to irradiate current curriculum development practices. The study was conducted across four higher education institutions in Ireland. Discourse analysis was used as a methodology within a post-structural theoretical framework which facilitated layered analysis and questioning of curriculum development practice and discourse. An advisory group was used to offer depth and validity to the analysis and interpretation, and as a capacity building tool. The findings were enlightening. In some cases they echoed concerns revealed in the literature; in addition some unexpected narratives were also uncovered. In any event, the findings contribute to the current curriculum development conversation by offering a framework for curriculum development practice and discourse. I argue if this framework is used as an early discourse and planning tool it can offer transformative potential for curricula. It does so by facilitating the development team scope out the project through questioning and challenging existing curriculum development practices across three key areas – policy for curriculum development at institutional level; practice at development level; and discourse guiding practice. It is the final pillar of this framework – discourse guiding practice (see appendix for complete framework), that this paper concentrates attention on in terms of its ability to design transformative curricula. Curriculum has the potential to truly change a learner's life, and thus, the environment they advance into. I am concerned that conversely, it may leave learners unchanged and indifferent about the world they inhabit. This, to my mind, would be a lost opportunity for everyone. I argue that curriculum is a powerful tool. It can offer transformative potential for learners, educators, the economy and wider society. I join other educators who have argued for greater curricula discourse and reflection (Apple, 1982; Barnett, 2013; Barnett and Coate, 2006; Hogan, 2010; Scott, 2007; Stenhouse, 1975) in order to challenge, question and develop transformative curricula.

2 Relevant literature

Curriculum influenced by scientific management principles, referred to also as the social efficiency model marks the beginning of the field of curriculum study; in particular the work of Bobbit (Hlebowitsh, 2005). This approach is objectives driven, aimed at

providing clarity in terms of tangible and measurable outcomes. Difficulties of the objectives-based approach were discussed by Popham (1972) who claimed that not all objectives were tangible enough to measure, but often important enough for inclusion e.g., aesthetic appreciation. Similarly, Scott (2007) discusses his concern regarding the behavioural objectives model in particular the manner in which the model does not recognise or give value to unintended, but relevant, learning outcomes. From an ideological perspective, a more fundamental disparagement of this view is the reductionist nature of the approach evidenced in the manner in which curriculum development is reduced to a scientific technical form of producing learners in a conveyor belt manner, similar to that of industry and product production. Kelly levels his trepidations tersely when saying “to adopt this kind of industrial model for education is to assume it is legitimate to mould human beings... without making any allowance for their own individual wishes, desires or interests” [Kelly, (2009), p.71]. In rejecting the curriculum driven by behavioural change or modification towards achievement of pre-designed objectives, Lawton (1984, p.23) warns that this ‘closed system’ view does not contribute to divergent thinking where ambiguity is tolerated. I share the occupation of these educationalists who have socio-ideological worries about the specificity and granularity of objectives reducing learning opportunities to those stated in the objectives, and not accommodating in any sufficient manner development of the broader individual. This view is in opposition to curriculum as divergent where development of learner’s critical thinking and inquiry skills are nurtured through thoughtfully informed and appropriate pedagogy. Stenhouse (1970, pp.75–77) used the example of great literary works saying that learners’ responses cannot be predetermined through learning outcomes specified as objectives. He said that there are principles or ‘canons’ which can be used to evaluate understanding from misunderstanding but these principles are not easily analysed as pre-specified behaviour. The learner’s treatment of the canons are learning outcomes, but not pre-specified. Stenhouse (1975) reasoned that operational objectives were low-level, easy to measure and state; and higher-level outcomes were neglected because they were not easy to express in tangible form. He argued that educators should be concerned with issues broader than behavioural change, for instance learning requiring critical inquiry and engagement, and in using the example of literary art he argued a learner’s development is in their response to a piece of literature, rather than a pre-imposed interpretation transmitted by the educator by way of learning objectives. Similarly, Eisner (1969) used music and fine art to illustrate the disservice that intended objectives can have on learners critically engaging in artistic endeavours in a divergent way. More recently, Barbezat and Bush (2014), offered a form of contemplative pedagogical practice in higher education as a way of expanding the traditional curriculum where knowledge and analytical abilities are fostered, to one where learners have agency in their learning. This is also known as self-determined learning or heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2015). They, similar to the critics of the objectives approach, objected to curriculum based on outcomes because of its single minded or narrow focus. Barbezat and Bush (2014) argued that a narrow approach based on goals may contribute to a mindless learner, as opposed to a mindful learner. If a learner is mindful they are in the learning and of the moment, as opposed to a mindless learner who is not. They fear that learner attention may be drawn to one of success or failure rather than a natural desire for inquiry or exploration when they are mindlessly learning. In this context curricula developed within a behavioural objectives paradigm does not offer transformative potential with divergent learning in a space where ambiguity and open

ended questions are accepted and expected, and the role of teacher is, as Stenhouse (1975) advocated, one that facilitates discovery through inquiry-based pedagogy that encourages discussion and learner agency. Curricula developed using inquiry-based learning may provide some opportunity for more critical broad thinking as can be seen from the model Doll (1989) proposes where inquiry-based curricula informs a learner-centred approach based on richness; recursion; relations and rigor. In richness, Doll advocated a curriculum of openness that is "...rich enough in depth and breadth to encourage meaning making" [Doll, (1989), p.243]. It is not about quantity but more about quality of knowledge. Recursion refers to a nonlinear curriculum, described also as spiral (Bruner et al., 1976) and requires learners to actively engage in learning by creating their own examples and learning triggers; again showing learners as agents of the learning. The relations category in Doll's model views curriculum creation or development as a social activity requiring much reflection and discussion. Within this concept is an acceptance that all learning, regardless of whether it is internal or external of the discipline being studied, is worthwhile for the learner and offers a multiple-perspective lens for the learner to understand and see learning within different contexts, thereby offering multiple frames of reference for the learner. Finally, the concept of rigor refers to integrative learning based on problems or issues. This concept is not new and takes its roots in the work of Dewey (1902) where he advocated a curriculum of inquiry that combined the needs of the learner, society and content; and viewed the teacher as a facilitator through activity and reinforcement.

Fundamental to transformative curricula is a shared understanding of curriculum development and underpinning theory, as discussed above. Rathcliff (1997, p.5) observed that often educators come to the curriculum development process with varying assumptions about what curriculum is. He said that if a design team or committee "... make this leap of faith' then it ... may lead to unnecessary disputes over nomenclature, and worse, aborted attempts at fundamental change". Education is a messy business. It is as Apple (1982) suggested, full of contradictions and struggle between different groups with differing power balance arrangements with regard to what gets included, and by default excluded from a curriculum. Similarly, Hogan (2010) acknowledged that development of curricula will always be open to disagreement; primarily as a result of the discipline loyalties within a cultural tradition. Shay (2012, p.4) states "...what determines what gets selected, how it is sequenced, paced and evaluated is a broader recontextualising principle or purpose", and draws on the work of Bernstein (2000) and Maton (2011) regarding their discussions on contextualised and recontextualised knowledge. Shay (2012) advises curricula developers view knowledge on a continuum of theory in a non-contextual manner to knowledge that is context related. Non-context theory is both discipline specific knowledge, and generic type knowledge. Contextual knowledge is practical and must be firstly decontextualised in order to recontextualise it for the curriculum. Thus, it is the 'pedagogisation' of knowledge that is central to transformative curricula. In other words, decontextualisation of knowledge in the traditional form, to a recontextualised format in the curriculum. This facilitates building learner competencies and transferable skills that speak to notions of critical engagement and agency beyond traditional knowledge. By incorporating this thinking curricula can be designed to assist in transformative learning experiences for learners [Shay, (2012), p.5].

What is important in order to help navigate our way through the messy business and struggle for transformative curriculum is curriculum discourse attending to many of the issues, plus some, discussed in this paper. To this end, Barnett (2011) urged universities

to 'create and imagine' a space and time for intellectual discourse; epistemological considerations; curriculum and pedagogy; and ontology. He argued that as intellectuals we have an obligation to allow our ideas and opinions to influence practice within universities. Barnett presented this in the context of us striving for a 'feasible utopia' in higher education. In carving out a pathway towards a model of higher education that offers a 'feasible utopia' he encouraged processes "...to make possible rational discourse, systematic rational reflection, argumentative conflict, conversation and dissensus" [Barnett, (2011), p.70]. Similarly, Scott (2007, p.7) was concerned that some "key moments' in curriculum history, have been lost and we now have '...a false consensus on curriculum, barely agreed and certainly not negotiated". This, he claimed, has replaced what was once "...a vigorous debate about central educational questions". Barnett and Coate (2006) called on educators to take part in the curriculum conversation and argue this discussion is largely absent. They suggested this was because it is such a complex topic, some of these complexities are explored in the earlier part of this paper. They propose "[T]hrough curricula, ideas of higher education are put into action...values, beliefs, principles in relation to learning, understanding, knowledge, disciplines, individuality and society are realized" [Barnett and Coate, (2006), p.25]. Furthermore, they call for discussion at local level, amongst educators involved in curriculum development, and argue it is limited to content and structure or technical matters; and posit that bigger and what they call 'first order' questions are not really tackled. Curriculum discourse amongst educators is at the heart of curriculum development and delivery; and for the most part is a muted discourse. The framework developed as part of this research seeks to redress this by enjoining educators to voice their philosophical beliefs about education and to become aware of how these values influence curricula, thus contributing to transformative curricula. Transformative curricula is recognisable both in content and approach i.e., the teaching and learning strategy in addition to content knowledge and theory. Developing curricula where teaching and learning fosters inquiry-based learning; where broad critical thinking is valued and nurtured, is crucial. Clearly structured content drawing from a body or relevant theory and concepts is equally important. But it is the marriage of both through curricula discourse that creates great potential. In order to fully embrace the pivotal synergy between both we, as educators, must engage in deep and meaningful curricula discourse. This can help create what Hogan calls for – a more imaginative understanding of curriculum that 'cultivates humanity's maturity' rather than 'matching the functional requirements of a globalised age'. In doing this he argued the learner will have "...a shared awareness that they are active and responsible participants in their own learning", where '...it becomes natural for them to ask more searching questions" [Hogan, (2010), p.154], thus offering a curriculum based on learner self-enquiry, critical reflection and agency. These competencies can greatly enhance our economy going forward, as opposed to graduates entering society with a body of knowledge but no essential skills or competencies to interrogate, investigate and manipulate that knowledge in a way that enhances the broader economy and society.

As a study, this research sought to build curricula development capacity among educators through discourse that questioned and explored current practices both within and outside of their own disciplines. In this way discourse analysis as an approach helped advance educators curricula development awareness of associated jargon and theory; thereby empowering them to contribute to the ongoing discourse and their sense of agency in same.

3 Methodology and analysis

As discussed above, building curriculum development capacity through educator discourse was central to this study. For that reason, the research framework is one of post-structuralism, influenced by Foucauldian thinking. Although it is difficult to assign a theoretical framework to Foucault because he resisted prescription and categorisation in favour of questioning and challenging theoretical concepts, theorists and writers have aligned his work with that of post-structuralism since it demonstrates much of the same characteristics (Best and Kellner, 1994; Sarup, 1993; Walshaw, 2007). Foucault advised questioning what we have become familiar with and urges us to question ‘...distinctions in our own world of discourse’ [Foucault, (2010), p.22]. The challenge being to avoid making judgments based on the ideal, rather to uncover or illuminate collective ideals and practices (Allen, 2012; Graham, 2005). This inquiry sought to emulate this thinking by using discourse to question current practices with a view to building capacity and agency among educators involved in curriculum development. Using the literature review as the basis, the research questions used to stimulate discourse and contribute to capacity building and agency around curriculum development were:

- 1 What do educators see the purpose of higher education as being?
- 2 What are educators’ experiences of curriculum development discourse?
- 3 Are educators’ philosophical beliefs underpinning their experience of curriculum development?
- 4 What contextual factors do educators see influencing the practice of curriculum development?
- 5 Where do the loci of power reside in curriculum development?
- 6 How can educators be empowered in relation to curriculum development?

Foucault was less about truth finding and more in favour of exploring and illuminating practice and theory (Sarup, 1993). In the context of this research, my standpoint is that there are no universal truths regarding curriculum development practice and discourse. Instead there are snapshots of practice in particular times and spaces and relative to those experiencing it. This research provided an opportunity to question curriculum development practice and discourse in higher education and explore the mantric stable identities that influence the practice through critical discourse. Discourse analysis was used as both a methodological approach and an analysis tool. As an approach, discourse analysis, according to Philips and Hardy (2002, p.6), is about the “...construction of a broader social reality... and concern with how that social reality came into existence through the constructive effects of various discourse and associated texts”. The discourses analysed in this inquiry are representative of the practice of curriculum development at a particular point in time, 2012–2014. In this inquiry, the dominant discourse mediating curriculum development practice came from educators in the form of focus groups and interviews. Additional discourses layered through the analysis were those of providers, and policy in higher education in Ireland drawing on institutional formal texts – ‘found documents’ as Taylor (2014) refers to them – such as strategy documents and curriculum validation panel reports from all four providers involved in the study.

The participants used in this research were uniform in that they are all educators and all involved in recent curriculum development processes. However, there was also some heterogeneity in that they were from diverse disciplines, had different curriculum development experiences, and worked in four different colleges. Cohen et al. (2007) recommend that 'where there is heterogeneity in the population, then a larger sample must be selected on some basis that respects heterogeneity' [Cohen et al., (2007), p.105]. In affirmation of the sample size of 35 used for this study, Cohen et al. (2007) use an example of six within a homogenous group. Four colleges took part in the study, two from the private and two from the Institute of Technology (IOT) sectors. The selection of colleges to participate in the study was non-probable whereby I targeted institutions deliberately based on my working relationship with each. Cohen et al. (2007) acknowledge that non-probability samples are 'frequently the case in small-scale research...because despite the disadvantages that arise from their non-representativeness, they are far less complicated...and adequate where researchers do not intend to generalize their finding beyond the sample in question' [Cohen et al., (2007), p.113]. As with the sample colleges participating in this research, participant sample within each college was non-probable. Participant's discipline background and curriculum development experience varied significantly, both within and across colleges. This was anticipated, and welcomed, because the diversity stimulated discussion, contributed to capacity building and agency around curriculum development, and illuminated a host of different experiences and viewpoints. This discourse from educators was used as one layer of data. In this context there were four focus groups, one in each participating college, with educators who worked as part of a curriculum development team; and a total of nine in-depth interviews with educators who had led a curriculum development team in the same time period. In keeping with discourse analysis other discourses were used. These included what Taylor (2012) refers to as found documents – strategy documents from three out of the four colleges, the fourth college was in the process of designing a new strategy and the old strategy was not current enough for inclusion; and discourse from validation panels who examined new curricula submissions, offered input and guidance, and ultimately recommendation to the awarding body, QQI, that the curricula be validated. There were seven such reports used all. In total there were 23 different texts analysed and interpreted across four different discourses – educators working as part of a curriculum development team, educators leading a development team, institutional strategy documents, and validation panel reports. The following table (Table 1) provides an overview of texts/discourses used.

Table 1 Texts and discourses

	<i>College A</i>	<i>College B</i>	<i>College C</i>	<i>College D</i>
Focus group	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interview 1	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interview 2	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interview 3	X	X	✓	X
Strategy document	✓	X	✓	✓
Validation panel report 1	✓	✓	✓	✓
Validation panel report 2	✓	✓	✓	X

An advisory group was used as part of the methodology. They did not inform the research aim and objectives. They were convened to help bring greater objectivity and robustness to the methodology and analysis. Convenience sampling, also referred to as accidental or opportunity sampling, was used to draw the advisory group of six work colleagues together. They were chosen for their central role in curriculum development, and their willingness and availability to consult in this manner. Cohen et al. (2007, p.114) say a sample chosen in this way does not claim to represent any group 'apart from itself'. As such, generalisations about the wider population cannot be drawn; which fits with the purpose and brief of the advisory group in this context. The advisory group were not part of the sample and were never used as such. The dual role of the advisory group for this research was to contribute to:

- 1 capacity building in the curriculum development processes
- 2 the validity and reliability of the research by bringing greater objectivity and reducing reliance on researcher reflexivity.

This is reflective of Porter et al. (2006, p.12) who suggest that the use of advisory groups is not just to redress imbalances, but also to contribute to quality research.

Coding for analysis was assigned at design stage based on theoretical codes related to research questions informed by the literature review. This is consistent with some qualitative research practice – "...a major feature of qualitative research is that analysis often begins early on in the data collection process" [Cohen et al., (2007), p.462]. MacMillan (2005) draws on the work of Porter and Wetherell (1987) in her discussion on evaluating discourse analysis, and says that coding in the early stages of analysis facilitates a broad overview of the data, and is acceptable practice in this manner, but only if the coding directly relates to the research questions, as is the case with this study. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that coding at an early stage is common in discourse analysis because it facilitates the researcher in discovering broad areas and patterns within the discourse. The codes used for analysis, and related research questions guiding this inquiry (discussed above), were:

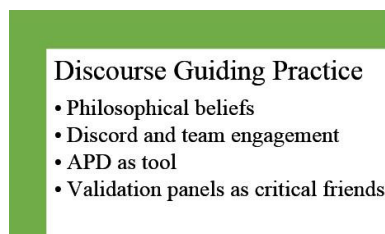
- 1 purpose of higher education
- 2 practice(s) of curriculum development discourse
- 3 educators' philosophical beliefs
- 4 context and landscape of higher education
- 5 loci, or perceived loci, of power
- 6 empowerment and agency.

The texts coded (see Table 1) signal something to the world of curriculum development. Firstly, transcripts and recordings from the nine in-depth interviews with leaders of curriculum development teams in four separate providers of higher education, were coded. The second discourse used was transcripts and recordings from four focus groups, one in each of the institutions involved in the study. As discussed, where available current strategy documents were used as a third form of discourse for analysis. The final discourse came in the form of curriculum development validation panel reports. The

panels consisted of members of the external community of discipline and teaching experts. They work in compliance with regulations outlined by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the accrediting body for higher education programs in Ireland (QQI, 2010). Coding of texts involved presenting the data sets – i.e., the four different discourses – by code, as recommended by Cohen et al. (2007). In keeping with discourse analysis, coding ran across all four discourses and did not seek to categorise based on any individual, group, or institution. NVivo was used as a tool to manage the coding process. It was not used for analysis. MacMillan (2005) provided practical evidence of using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), such as NVivo and Atlas.ti, for discourse analysis. Despite Gibbs et al. (2002) saying there are some qualitative approaches that have little use of CAQDAS, one being discourse analysis; and Hardt-Mautner (1995) arguing that anything which facilitates distance between the texts and coding is not to be promoted, MacMillan (2005) and Taylor (2014) both support the use of CAQDAS to help organise data i.e., code the data, but not analyse it. NVivo was used to manage the coding process by assigning excerpts from the texts to the pre-allocated codes. It facilitated, what MacMillan (2005) refers to as searching and retrieving segments of data in the context of the text. Once the data was coded, a review process was initiated involving both myself and the advisory group. In some instances this involved re-coding. Coding the data by research question had the advantage of organising and collating the data in a way that I had thought might answer the research questions. However, it quickly became apparent that this was not going to work. As I commenced analysis and interpretation by comparing and analysing codes it became clear that there were a number of unexpected narratives emerging, and in an effort to remain true to discourse analysis I had to find some way of acknowledging and reporting these narratives. This interpretation was a reflexive and reactive interaction between the data and I, and is an acceptable tactic during analysis and interpretation [Cohen et al., (2007), p.469]. Consequently, I annotated the coded data through dated comments and reflections by way of memos. Cohen et al. (2007, p.469) discuss this process as more data, or secondary data to further help with analysis and interpretation. The dated memos were linked across codes to provide common narratives or patterns. These narratives were then grouped into five themes – curriculum development teams; curriculum development discourse; educators' philosophical beliefs; industry driven curriculum; and regulatory framework. There was some overlap and similarity between codes and themes.

4 Findings

As discussed above, five themes emerged from the data – curriculum development teams; curriculum development discourse; the impact of educators' philosophical beliefs on curriculum development; industry driven curriculum development; and influence of the regulatory framework. Findings from these themes contributed to a framework for curriculum development practice and discourse (see appendix for complete framework). This paper presents one element of the framework – curriculum discourse guiding practice (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Discourse guiding curriculum development (see online version for colours)

Curriculum development discourse was found to vary considerably both within, and across institutions. There does not appear to be any one model or approach advocated or used, apart from the regulated policy and criteria required by QQI (2010). But these policies provide only a template and a minimum set of requirements from a QA perspective. They do not provide a charter or structure for pre-development reflection and discussions. No frameworks or best practice models emerged regarding timing and approach for early educational philosophical discussions regarding the vision for the curriculum, despite the fact that the literature has been calling for such interventions for the last decade at least. A recurrent narrative informing curriculum development across almost all of the data was one where educators philosophically viewed curriculum as a vehicle to empower learners and help them develop critical thinking skills. Respondents interviewed were of the philosophical view that education is to empower learners, and in many respects imbue them with a love of learning, exemplified in the following excerpt:

I have to declare that I come from the perspective that I have always been a person who loves to learn. I love facts...I just love reading and I absorb things at unspecified times...because I love to learn...so in that sense the purpose of education has to be about enlightenment, it has to be more. It has to be about broadening their horizons. (CollegeA_Interview1)

The 'more' referred to in this quote relates to industry-ready graduates as that was the context of the conversation at the time. This view prevailed through much of the data, in particular with curriculum development leaders who philosophically felt driven by the need to create a curriculum that nurtured development of critical thinking skills to equip graduates entering the world beyond education in an informed and confident way and in a way that might contribute to their sense of agency in the world they inhabit. They acknowledged the central role of discipline knowledge but presented that as a 'given' or minimum and argued for a curriculum that goes beyond discipline content and skill, exemplified in the following:

When we design a course, we kind of have the practical things and then the liberal arts things as well that develop them as a person and more critical and analytical as well. Philosophically I would like to think we are creating more analytical and critical graduates instead of just having everyone prepared for a skill-based society. We need people who are thinking about the bigger picture and how things can work better for society. (CollegeA_Interview2)

This is redolent of considerations discussed in the literature section earlier regarding views of Lawton (1984) who advocated an open ended curriculum, and Stenhouse (1970) who called for a curriculum that facilitates divergent learning where critical enquiry and engagement were of paramount importance. Additionally Bernstein (1971) advanced the call from Dewey (1902) and supported models of curricula and pedagogy that facilitated learner inquiry and progression where learners develop a sense of agency. Despite the passion and influence of educators' philosophical beliefs guiding curriculum development, and apart from the participants' experience in this inquiry, there was a noted absence of such philosophical discourse within their colleges. This is connected to findings regarding curriculum discourse and shared vision. Without such philosophical discussions it is difficult to conceive a shared vision for a curriculum. This economic practice of curriculum discourse could be interpreted from data as relating to workload and resource restrictions and supports Barnett's (2011) call for institutions to carve out a space for such reflection and discourse.

An outlying narrative that was not widespread in the data, but is of interest in terms of developing transformative curriculum as traversed in the literature, was one of curriculum development team discord. Discourse analysis as a methodology allows us to explore outliers of this nature because we are seeking to include all voices. Some participants viewed discord positively because it facilitated building constructive relationships conducive to curriculum development. In particular one institution appeared to encourage and embrace what they called disruptive questioning, in order to challenge the curriculum with a view to reforming or transforming it, for example:

We experienced disruption among the group. In hindsight a disruptive force is important to challenge and question the programme being developed. (Participant A)

... the discord and ensuing discussions led to a sense of my belonging to the process of curriculum development and ownership. (Participant B, CollegeB_FocusGroup)

This disruptive force speaks to Apple's (1982) notion of transformed curriculum through struggle and navigation through contradictions, as outlined earlier in the literature section. Also, again deliberated above, Barnett (2011, p.70) encourages educators to find mechanisms for processes "... to make possible rational discourse, systematic rational reflection, argumentative conflict, conversation and dissensus". Furthermore Hogan (2010) states that curricula are open to disagreement because of discipline loyalties. In any event, disagreement or discord can act as a stimulant for discourse and ultimately contribute to a transformed curriculum. Discord may serve to create what Hogan (2010) refers to as humanity's maturity through transformed curricula rather than reproducing graduates to meet functional requirements. Aside from the view that discord is productive, there were concerns that some voices, disruptive or otherwise, do not get heard because they are disengaged. The data uncovered that frequently curriculum development team leaders work with willing and motivated educators because otherwise they end up working with disengaged team members exemplified in the following quote:

... if you have water carriers you just end up going back to them again and again because they are dependable, and are fully engaged and interested in helping you design the programme. (CollegeA_Interview1)

Notwithstanding this practice, the reality of disengaged voices or unheard voices presented a real concern for curricula development because voices that do not get heard have implications for pedagogy and content that is not included exemplified in the following excerpt:

The final call is pure luck. It's just whoever's interested enough to come that day, which isn't right...

... core people participated, non-core people by and large did not.
(CollegeD_FocusGroup)

Curiously, and perhaps slightly worrying, is the sense that participants did not focus too much attention on how to engage the disengaged, there was a sense of acceptance or perhaps apathy regarding those who disengaged. Analysis of the validation reports showed that in many cases there was an absence of shared vision, for example:

The programme team need to define the philosophy, vision and values of the programme. (CollegC_ValidationReport1).

This malaise may in part be attributable to not all voices contributing to the vision which is concerning. There was selected evidence of some deliberation in being forced to contribute or engage through incentives and penalties.

A less prominent narrative, but one that resonates with new and emerging development in higher education in Ireland is that of academic and professional development. Currently the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning is in the process of developing a national professional development framework for those teaching in higher education (National Forum, 2015). The data analysed in this inquiry argues for curriculum professional development and support, with some citing professional teaching qualifications as important in this context. Others call for some type of in-house training which involves critical discourse regarding the practice and process of curriculum development within the regulatory framework and also within the philosophical and discipline space. The requirement is not in relation to professional support regarding discipline expertise, but in relation to curriculum development and underpinning pedagogy specifically:

What is necessary is some kind of concomitant or contemporaneous staff development ... around change [in the curriculum you are developing] ... if we had this expertise [curriculum development] anywhere in the house to sit down with us for a couple of hours in a workshop...some coaching or mentoring to encourage us to think and talk about it [curriculum development] before we put a stamp on it. (CollegeB_FocusGroup)

Some colleges have lecturer support and training units but the data did not show that these units were used specifically to drive curriculum development or critical reflection through discourse. Perhaps this is a lost opportunity and one that could be adopted across institutions to help carve out the space and time for this practice. In fact one college discussed how their educational development unit has been closed, only temporarily, but nonetheless it was not in operation at the time of this research as evidenced in the following excerpt:

Well, we used to have an educational development unit here until it got closed down. We had one of the first ones in the country, in fact, and we used to have a number of people and xxxx is the only one left. (participantA)

For the moment (participantB) [*implying the unit will reopen*].

I think every educational institution needs a group of people who are looking at these questions and supporting staff and saying, 'look, here's new ways of assessing' or 'here's new ways of developing a programme'. Because staff are busier and busier. (participantA, CollegeC_FocusGroup)

QQI require a validation panel to recommend approval of a new curriculum, or re-approval of a reviewed curriculum (QQI, 2010). The data showed evidence of inconsistent approaches and interfacing by curriculum development teams with panels. For example, in some cases curriculum development teams were confident they had a strong and robust program and sensed perhaps the panel had an agenda. Other experiences were less extreme whereby the experience with the panel was more open to frank and honest exchanges regarding curriculum content and design. The panel work to a set of policies outlined by QQI. According to QQI, the expert panel is tasked with assessing the program and the provider, to ensure the program meets validation criteria as specified in the Core Validation Policy and Criteria (QQI, 2010). Panels are selected on the basis of their expertise and experience in teaching and learning, the relevant discipline domain, and in validation and review processes. Notwithstanding, the panels' brief power relations can play a part in the panel/team relationship. Many participants disclosed feelings of fear and anxiety when preparing for validation panels, for example:

There is an awful fear around pressing the button [i.e., seeking validation approval]. I think it's because they [teams] are so unsure. I mean it is complex and then you are trying to second guess validation panels and there is a whole sense of fail, if you don't get it through validation panel, rather than I'm going to tweak it and it's going to be a better programme ... And you can never tell. Because even if you are choosing a couple of people on that panel yourself, you never know, it's all down to what happens on the day. Peoples moods, you never know where people are coming from. (CollegeB_Interview1)

Despite this perceived fear, the data also uncovered that experience of panel discourse and confidence of knowing the current model and system of curriculum development and compliance in some cases allowed participants to re-empower themselves and take the lead, thereby critically engaging with the panels' observations:

We actually stood up to the panel and said, 'no' to what they were advising. we said, 'that didn't work and this is why we went back more confident...

... and assertive in the process that we had engaged in because the process had brought us to where we were and believing in our programme. (CollegeB_FocusGroup)

Thus the curriculum is enhanced through this type of rational and critical discourse where the learner is centre stage. Notwithstanding some of the concerns and inconsistencies concerning panel experiences, the findings across all focus groups illuminate the potential that validation panels have to build capacity amongst educators engaging in curriculum development, typified in the following contributions:

We have the validation panel to go through, so there's a good checking mechanism. You've six people in front of you, all experts in the field, and they're able to tell you what's right and what's wrong, the feedback was so useful. (Participant A)

The panel is very important. We were really pleased with the panel. (Participant B)

I think panels in general are improving. There's not that sort of sense of, you know the word that used to be used so often, 'I have to defend my programme.' I think that's leaving our vocabulary. I hope it is. And we're recognising that panels are colleagues who can come in and help inform this programme and make it the best kind of programme it can be. And you're right. I mean they're a group of experts and you're not even having to pay for them. They're just coming in and it's fabulous, yes. (participantC, CollegeD_FocusGroup)

This view is corroborated or supported through commendations found in panel reports. Panel contributions frequently commended the development team in terms of passion, approach and openness to engage in discussion with the panel exemplified in the following excerpt:

The team demonstrated open engagement and was very receptive to suggestions from the panel. (CollegeD_ValidationReport1)

The potential for the panel to add value and build capacity may currently be under tapped according to this inquiry. In working within a post-structural theoretical framework, and adopting discourse analysis principles, it is hoped that the process of this inquiry will further contribute to capacity building and agency around curriculum development.

5 Recommendations and conclusions

Despite largescale agreement about the importance of, and a desire for, curriculum development discourse, the findings show that there is room for greater curriculum discourse and reflection. Participants explored the challenges associated with the quest for carving out the time for curriculum development discourse and reflection. The findings demonstrate that whilst participants were eager to engage in such discourse, and keen to vigorously debate and challenge current curricula development practices as advocated by Barnett (2011) and Scott (2007), such discourse requires significant investment in terms of time and space, largely in addition to the daily teaching and learning commitments. There was concern that curriculum is often developed or reviewed on top of an already very heavy workload, and to the QQI templates which specify only the minimum required. Notwithstanding difficulties regarding finding the time and space, and accepting that this is attended to, the type of discourse experienced showed that early curriculum development discourse can assist a team in scoping out the project within a shared space whereby all voices are valid and heard. In this way educator agency and ownership of curricula can be enabled. The findings demonstrate that conversations of this manner help to understand and develop a shared set of assumptions about the curriculum. This addresses concerns elucidated by Rathcliff (1997) whereby a team may come to the curriculum development process with different assumptions about what the curriculum. If these varied assumptions are not critically explored, it may, Rathcliff claims, act as a barrier to fundamental change, thereby presenting a lost opportunity for developing transformative curriculum. Also, the findings point to a concerning revelation that disengaged voices do not get heard, with acknowledgement that this also may present a lost opportunity for curricula that is rich in content and design. Despite this concern, the research uncovered an opportunity to stimulate curricula discourse can be afforded through academic and professional development. Academic professional development workshops were suggested to assist by setting out the process for curriculum development and demonstrating how it relies on full engagement from all involved in

order for truly transformative curricula to be designed. Additionally validation panels offer a hitherto under-tapped potential for critical curricula discourse if the panels are viewed as critical friends.

In summary of the findings, the following ten contributions to emanate from the research are presented, and inform the framework for curriculum development as presented in the appendix:

- 1 Curriculum development with profound outcomes driven by mutually compatible economic, ideological and societal requirements is required. Development of curricula driven primarily by any one imperative is to be resisted.
- 2 Curricula developed as an open system where divergent thinking is stimulated, and learners are encouraged to tolerate ambiguity is called for. Learning outcomes (per QQI benchmarked standards) should be used as the minimum attainment required.
- 3 Curricula have transformative potential where educators' philosophical beliefs inform curriculum development. This can be facilitated through discourse across, and within disciplines, regarding what should and should not be included in the curriculum, and on what basis.
- 4 Curriculum development discourse requires sufficient lead time and needs to be in addition to the current development timescale. Significant time is required to deliberate and carve out a shared philosophical and pedagogical vision for curricula.
- 5 Curriculum development teams need to be convened with purpose. The net needs to be widely cast and justification for team composition should be presented to the validation panel.
- 6 Curriculum developed by a team, with team discourse used to guide and shape the curriculum in an informed manner will provide richer and more valuable outcomes. There should never be occasion where one person develops a curriculum. Validation panels can be used as a critical friends to stimulate discourse.
- 7 Mechanisms for decision making during the process of developing curricula need to be made explicit from the outset with recognition that team discord is to be valued as a tool for challenging and questioning the curricula as it is being developed.
- 8 Senior management must acknowledge and value the practice of curricula development by resourcing and rewarding educators for their role in curriculum development.
- 9 Policies for modifying curriculum during the five year lifecycle need to be reviewed to allow for more regular modification in an environment that welcomes such change where justifiable and reasonable.
- 10 Professional development opportunities can be used to empower educators in relation to curriculum development, by equipping them to develop curricula within open, challenging and compliant environments.

The complete framework can be found in the appendix and draws together the key findings in the context of the full piece of research and is offered to curriculum development teams for consideration at the early stage of developing curricula.

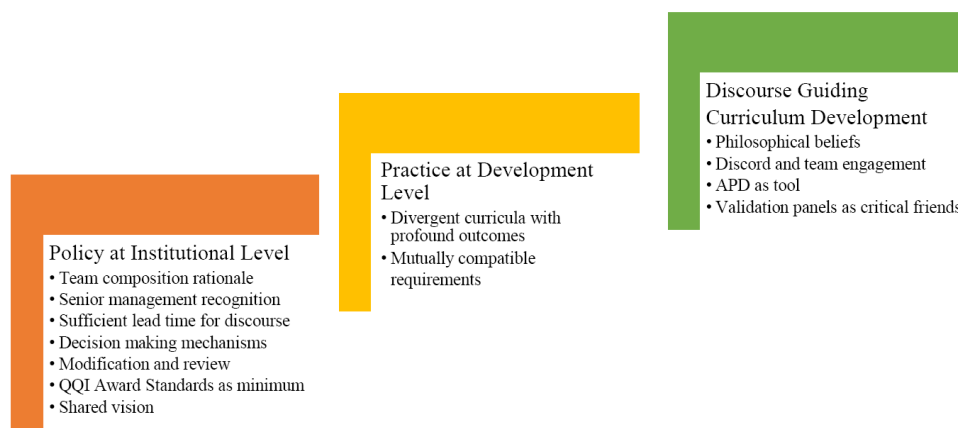
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Appendix

Figure A1 Framework for curriculum development practice and discourse (see online version for colours)



Source: O'Riordan (2015, p.112)